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THE LONELY GOD

AND OTHER POEMS

BY

JAMES STEPHENS

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THE LONELY GOD

I

So Eden was deserted, and at eve
Into the quiet place God came to grieve.
His face was sad: His hands hung slackly
down

Along His robe. Too sorrowful to frown,
He paced along the grassy paths and through
The silent trees, and where the flowers grew,
Tended by Adam. All the birds had gone
Out to the world, and singing was not one
To cheer the Lonely God out of His grief —
The silence broken only when a leaf
Tap't lightly on a leaf, or when the wind,
Slow-handed, swayed the bushes to its mind.

II

And so along the base of a round hill,
Rolling in fern, He bent His way until
He neared the little hut which Adam made,
And saw its dusky roof-tree overlaid
With greenest leaves. Here Adam and his
spouse

Were wont to nestle in their little house
Snug at the dew-time: here He, standing sad,
Sighed with the wind, nor any pleasure had
In heav'ly knowledge, for His darlings twain
Had gone from Him to learn the feel of pain,
And what was meant by sorrow and despair
— Drear knowledge for a Father to prepare.

III

Then, sad, He looked upon the little place
— A beehive round it was — with not a
trace

Of occupant or owner: standing dim
Among the gloomy trees it seemed to Him
A final desolation, the last word
Wherewith the lips of silence had been stirred.
Chaste and remote, so tiny and so shy,
So new withal, so lost to any eye,
So pac't of memories all innocent 1.
Of days and nights that in it had been spent
In blithe communion, Adam, Eve and He
Afar from heaven and its gaudery.

IV

And now no more! He still must be the God,
But not the Friend: a Father with a rod
Whose voice was fear, whose countenance a
threat,
Whose coming terror and whose going wet
With penitential tears: not ever more
Would they run forth to meet Him, as
before,

With careless laughter, striving each to be
First to His hand, and dancing in their glee
To see Him coming — they would hide in-
stead

At His approach, or stand and hang the head,
Speaking in whispers, and would learn to
pray

Instead of asking “Father, if we may.”

v

Never again to Eden would He haste
At cool of evening, when the sun had paced
Back from the tree-tops, slanting from the
rim

Of a low cloud, what time the twilight dim
Knit tree to tree in shadow, gathering slow
Till all had met and vanished in the flow
Of dusky silence, and a brooding star
Stared at the growing darkness from afar.

While haply now and then some nested bird
Would lift upon the air a sleepy word
Most musical, or swing its airy bed
To the high moon that drifted overhead.

VI

'Twas good to quit at even His great throne,
To lay His crown aside, and all alone
Down sloping through the quiet air to glide,
Unkenned by angels, silently and hide
In the green fields, by dappled shades where
brooks

Through leafy solitudes and quiet nooks
Flowed, hid from heav'nly majesty and pride,
From light astounding and the wheeling
wide

Of roaring stars. Thus does it ever seem
Good to the best to stray aside and dream
In narrow places, where the hand can feel
Something beside and know that it is real.

VII

His angels! silly creatures who could sing,
And sing again, and delicately fling
The smoky censer, bow and stand aside
In muted adoration; thronging wide
Till nowhere could He look, but soon He saw
An angel bending humbly to the law
Mechanic; knowing nothing more of pain
Than when they were forbid to sing again,
Or swing anew the censer or bow down
In humble adoration of His frown.

This was the thought in Eden as He trod
. . . It is a lonely thing to be a God.

VIII

So long! afar through Time He bent His
mind
For the beginning which He could not
find.

Through endless centuries and backwards
still,

Endless for ever, till His 'stonied will
Halted in circles, dizzied in the swing
Of mazy nothingness — His mind could
bring

Not to subjection, grip, or hold the theme
Whose wide horizon melted like a dream
To thinnest edges. Infinite behind
The piling centuries were trodden blind
In gulfs chaotic — so He could not see
When He was not who always had To Be.

IX

Not even Godly Fortitude can stare
Into Eternity, nor easy bear
The insolent vacuity of Time:
It is too much, the mind can never climb
Up to its meaning, for, without an end,
Without beginning, Plan, or scope, or trend

To point a path, there nothing is to hold
And steady surmise: so the mind is rolled
And swayed and drowned in dull Immensity.
Eternity outfaces even Me
With its indiff'rence, and the fruitless year
Would swing as fruitless were I never here.

X

And so for ever, day and night the same,
Years flying swiftly nowhere, like a game
Played random by a madman — without end
Or any reasoned object but to spend
What is unspendable — Eternal Woe!

O Weariness of Time that fast or slow
Goes never farther, never has in view
An ending to the thing it seeks to do,
And so does nothing: merely ebb and flow
From nowhere into nowhere, touching so
The shores of many stars, and passing on,
Careless of what may come or what has gone.

XI

O solitude unspeakable! to be
For ever with oneself, never to see
An equal face or feel an equal hand,
To sit in state and issue reprimand,
Admonishment or glory, and to smile
Disdaining what was happening the while.
O to be breast to breast against a foe!
Against a friend! To strive and not to know
The laboured outcome: Love nor be aware
How much the other loved and greatly care
With angry passion for that love or hate,
Nor know what joy or dole was hid in Fate.

XII

For I have ranged the spacy widths and
gone
Swift north and south, and strove to look
upon

An ending somewhere. Many days I sped
Hard to the west, a thousand years I fled
Eastwards in fury, but I could not find
The fringes of the Infinite. Behind
And yet behind, and ever at the end
Came new beginnings, paths that did not
wend

To anywhere were there; and ever vast
And vaster spaces opened till at last,
Dizzied with distance, thrilling to a pain
Unnameable, I turned to Heaven again.

XIII

And there my angels were prepared to fling
The cloudy incense, there prepared to sing
My praise and glory — O in fury I
Then roared them senseless, then threw down
the sky

And stamped upon it, buffeted a star
With my great fist, and flung the sun afar:

Shouted my anger till the mighty sound
Rung to the width, frightening the furthest
bound

And scope of hearing: tumult vaster still,
Thronging the echo, dinned my ears until
I fled in silence, seeking some dark place
To hide Me from the very thought of Space.

XIV

And so, thought He, in my own image I
Have made a man, remote from heaven high
And all its humble angels. I have poured
My essence in his nostrils. I have cored
His heart with my own spirit. Part of Me
His mind with laboured growth unceasingly
Must strive to equal Mine, must ever grow
By virtue of my essence till he know
Both Good and Evil through the solemn
test
Of Sin and Retribution, till, with zest,

He feels his godhead, soars to challenge Me
In mine own heaven for supremacy.

XV

Through savage beasts and still more savage
clay,

Invincible, I bid him fight a way
To greater battles; crawling through defeat
Into defeat again; ordained to meet
Disaster in disaster; prone to fall,
I prick him with my memory to call
Defiance at his victor, and arise
With anguished fury to his greater size.
Through tribulation, terror and despair,
Astounded, he must fight to higher air,
Climb battle into battle till he be
Confronted with a flaming sword and Me.

XVI

So growing age by age to greater strength,
To greater beauty, skill and deep intent:

With wisdom wrung from pain, with energy
Nourished in Sin and Sorrow he will be
Strong, pure and proud an enemy to meet
Tremendous on a battlefield, or sweet
To talk to as a friend with candid mind.

— Dear Enemy or Friend, so hard to
find,

I yet shall find you, yet shall put My breast
In enmity or love against your breast:
Shall smite or clasp with equal ecstasy
The Enemy or Friend who grows to Me.

XVII

The topmost blossom of his growing I
Shall take unto Me, cherish and lift high
Beside Myself upon My holy Throne:
— It is not good for God to be alone.

The perfect Woman of his perfect race
Shall sit beside Me in the highest place

And be My Goddess, Queen, Companion,
Wife,
The rounder of My majesty, the life
Of My ambition. She will smile to see
Me bending down to worship at her knee
Who never bent before, and she will say
“Dear God, who was it taught *Thee* how to
pray?”

XVIII

And through Eternity, adown the slope
Of never-ending Time, compact of hope,
Of zest and young enjoyment, I and She
Will walk together, sowing jollity
Among the raving stars, and laughter through
The vacancies of heaven, till the blue
Vast amplitudes of Space lift up a song,
The echo of our presence, rolled along
And ever rolling where the Planets sing,
The majesty and glory of the King.

Then, conquered, thou Eternity, shall lie
Under My hand as little as a fly

XIX

I am the Master. I the Mighty God
And you my Workshop. Your pavilions trod
By Me and Mine shall never cease to be,
For you are but the magnitude of Me,
The width of My extension, the surround
Of My dense splendour. Rolling, rolling
round

To steeped Infinity and out beyond
My own strong comprehension you are
bond

And servile to My doings. Let you swing
More wide and ever wide you do but fling
Around this instant Me and measure still
The breadth and the proportion of My
Will.

xx

Then stooping to the hut,—a beehive round,—

God entered in and saw upon the ground
A dusty garland, Adam, learned to weave,
Had loving placed upon the head of Eve
Before the terror came, when joyous they
Could look for God at closing of the day
Profound and happy. So the Mighty Guest
Bent, took and placed the blossoms in His
breast.

“This,” said He, gently, “I shall show My
Queen

When She hath grown to Me in space serene
And say, ‘Twas worn by Eve.” So, smiling
fair,

He spread abroad His wings upon the air.

ASTRAY

LITTLE lady! as you walk
With a shy and pensive pace:
Little lady! as you talk
I am looking in your face.

Who am I? you do not know,
Or you wouldn't eye me so.

Sure your step is like a wave,
And your voice is sweet to charm,
And your face, composed and grave,
Shows no motion of alarm.

Little lady! If I say
Who I am, you'll run away.

Little lady! I am Death,
I am sent to comfort thee:

Now you start and catch your breath:
Lady, do not run from me.

Just awhile ago you smiled,
Little lady! Little child!

Little lady! Smile of Grace!

This is not the road for you.

This is not a fitting place.

— Once there was a Lily grew
In a garden. — Cease to roam,
I have come to bring you home.

IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE

I saw this is a place at the world's end
When He was left alone without a friend

From every place, from far and near they
came,

The blind and battered, and the lewd and
lame,

The frightened people and the helpless crew
Who hid in cellars, and the stragglers who
Dodged here and there in corners of the earth
Cursing the sun, and they who from their
birth

Were lap't in madness, raved' and strode
along,

Chanting in fury to a holy song

Their flighty wrath: and all the hungry folk,
Who through the world had rummaged,
yelped and broke

Stiff to a run, for vengeance was in view,
And everyone knew what he had to do.

It was the Judgement Day, and so they sped,
These vagabonds who always had been dead
E'en when alive, and massed into the space
Between two stars: a deep and hollow place
Rolling immense, a swirl of blue and grey
Steeped out of eyesight: so it ever lay
Swinging in whispers, prickling to the sound
Till a wind's whimper, rolling round and
round,

Jolted in thunder, or the dreary sigh
Of a dead man drummed madness on the sky.

Here they kept silence, every face intent
With a dumb grin upon the sun was bent,

Till sudden, huge and stately, came He fleet
Red from the sun, with fire about His feet
And flaming brow: and as He walked in fire
Those million, million muzzles lifted higher,
Stared at Him, grinned damnation, toned a
yelp,

A vast malignant query, "Did you help?"
And at the sound the jangled spaces threw
Echo to echo: thunders bit and flew
Through deeper thunders into such a bay
The Judge stood frightened, turned and stole
away.

CHANGE

THERE'S a cloud upon the sky.

There's a voice upon the air.

'Tis the wind that with a sigh

Stays awhile and hushes by,

Mourning where the trushes were,

Mourning that the trees are bare.

All the leaves have fallen slow:

Now they rustle on the ground,

Crinkle-tip and russet glow,

Yellow leaf and brown they go

With a little withered sound,

Flitting on the air around.

All the birds have gone away,

All the daisies too have fled:

Buttercups have had their day,
And the grass is turning grey
Thinking of the pansy dead,
And the poppy's sleepy head.

Sad and sad the breezes blow.
Leaves are lifted up and thrown
— Crinkle-tip and russet glow —
Withered to the earth below.
Death's the harvest, Death alone.
What's the use in having grown?

WHO'LL CARRY A MESSAGE?

FATHER unto whom we lift
At the closing of the day
Prayer and praise — a tiny gift —
Thou art very far away.
Feeble little people we
Vainly tell our misery.

If we cannot understand,
Even while we pray to Thee,
Why Thou dost not stretch a hand
To allay our misery:
Father unto whom we pray,
Thou art very far away.

It is strange a Father should
From His children thus be far.

Thou who art so great and good
Surely cannot know we are
Weeping here in misery,
Mourning we are far from Thee.

Tears are very fragile things,
Hopeless things that cannot rise:
Sorrow has not any wings.

How can Sorrow reach the skies?
Fathers when they live too high
Cannot hear their children cry.

If You hear us when we pray,
Smitten down by hunger dread,
Unto Thee from day to day,
“Give us now our daily bread.”

Father, while Thy children groan
Can Thou sit upon a throne?

SECRETS

WHEN I was young, I used to think
That every eye peered through a chink;
And every man was hid behind
His own thick self where none could find;
That every woman in the street,
Looking fair and smiling sweet,
Was maybe hiding thoughts that were
Not quite so sweet, nor quite so fair
As her kind smile and blossom face:
She hived in some forgotten place
Within herself, and could not bear
That any man should see her there.
. . . And though I'm older, still I see
In every face a mystery.

LIGHT O' LOVE

BUT now, said she, I must away.
And if I tend another fire
In some one's house, this you will say:
It is not that her love doth tire;
This is the price she has to pay
For bread she gets no other way,
Still craving for her heart's desire.

And so she went out from the door
While I sat quiet in my chair.
She ran back once again, no more:
I heard a creaking on the stair,
A lifted latch, one moment fleet
I heard the noises of the street.
Then silence booming everywhere.

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